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May 6, 2011

Mr. Philip Isenberg
Delta Stewardship Council
980 Ninth Street, Suite 1500
Sacramento,CA 95814

RE: Delta Plan; Third Staff Draft

Dear Chairman Isenberg:

Ducks Unlimited has reviewed the latest draft of the Delta Plan, identified as the "Third Staff Draft Delta Plan." Our comments concern Chapter 5 entitled "Restore the Delta Ecosystem."

Ducks Unlimited has been and continues to be frustrated at the lack of planning for true ecosystem restoration. As we have indicated in previous correspondence, Ducks Unlimited strongly supports restoration of the wetlands in the Delta, Suisun Marsh and the remainder of the San Francisco Bay estuary. However, continued seemingly exclusive focus on fish and fish habitat restoration jeopardizes much of the wetland restoration already accomplished in this region and continues to bias proposed efforts away from holistic restoration and towards single species or genera management.

The Central Valley serves as the primary wintering area for the entire Pacific Flyway and the Delta, Suisun marsh and San Francisco Bay are key areas used by migratory waterbirds. The Central Valley once contained over 4 million acres of wetland and supported 20-40 million waterfowl annually. Today its wetlands have been reduced by close to 95%. Nevertheless, it still constitutes, quite possibly, the most important migratory bird habitat on the entire planet. Every acre that we are able to protect and restore is critical.

The Delta wetlands themselves are historically, and continue to be, significant particularly for highly valued migratory species such as tundra swans, white fronted geese, northern pintails, canvasback and Sandhill cranes. Prior to European settlement and the resulting massive manipulation of its hydrology, the area presented one of the few large wetland complexes available to migrating birds throughout much of the fall. Although these wetlands have been seriously degraded over the past 150 years, they remain an essential component of the Central Valley wintering grounds.

Because of this significance, Ducks Unlimited considers working here to be one of our highest priorities. Our staff of biologists, engineers and other conservation workers have successfully initiated and

completed numerous wetland restoration projects in the Delta. Our supporters, allies and partners have established duck clubs and refuges where tens of thousands of acres of habitat have been conserved. Existing Delta wetlands serve a large portion of the 5-6 million birds that live in the Central Valley from August through April. The Central Valley Joint Venture partnership, on which DU and 19 other NGOs and public agencies participate, has adopted a long-term implementation plan, based on rigorous science and realistic expectations, where the Delta and its wetlands play a pivotal role. In the Delta we have restored over 8,000 acres of wetlands and enhanced approximately 30,000 agricultural acres. We remain focused on completing our goals for the Delta will require restoring 19,000 acres of seasonal wetlands and enhancing 52,000 acres of agricultural lands. Focusing on just fish, as the Delta Plan does, may prevent reaching these goals and in fact may increase the needed wetland acres if restoration is not done with ecosystem integrity in mind.

Ducks Unlimited is not new to the Delta, nor are our partners. In the late 1980's DU helped to establish the Cosumnes River Preserve. Over the years we have restored thousands of acres of wetlands there and in the Yolo Bypass, on various Delta Islands in the Suisun Marsh and along coastal areas of San Francisco Bay. All of this has contributed to our overarching goals of providing wintering habitat needed to support waterfowl populations equivalent to the levels that existed in the 1970s.

Ducks Unlimited and our partners have focused on conserving a variety of wetlands in the Delta, focusing on the array of habitat niches that serve the biological needs of wintering birds. Food, expressed in the form of calories, or energy content, is the unit of measurement we employ in establishing our acreage objectives. For Delta wetlands to continue to contribute to our conservation goals, it is essential that high quality, as well as quantity, of habitat is maintained and restored. By "quality" we mean high food-producing wetlands –ones that reliably produce certain seeds, tubers, and other plant products utilized by a wide array of wildlife. These wetlands are for the most part seasonal: dry and occasionally irrigated during the growing season as they produce desirable plants, and flooded during the winter to make them available to wintering migratory birds. A few species of migratory birds use permanently and deeply flooded wetlands, but the vast majority of the wintering waterfowl, cranes and shorebird needs are served by these seasonal wetlands. Just as anadromous fishes utilize Delta wetlands for a critical portion of their life cycle –most notably as maturing juveniles migrating to the sea, the seasonal wetlands of the Delta, Suisun Marsh and other portions of the Central Valley provide an critical link in the life cycle of birds travelling from northern breeding grounds to our wintering areas here.

The types of wetlands that favor the needs of fish are not identical or interchangeable. Yet, despite our repeated suggestions that the Delta ecosystem is more complex, the Third Staff Draft Delta Plan appears to remain focused almost exclusively on restoration work to improve conditions for fish. In fact, the entire section of the Draft Plan that addresses "ecosystem restoration" aims the discussion of "(w) hat does a changing Delta mean to the fish communities that use the Delta?" (Page 64, lines 22-31). Earlier in the section it is suggested that "elements of concern" such as individual species, would be the specific aim of "ecosystem-based management and restoration, and that what is "'of concern' reflects prevailing social and economic needs and values..." (Page 63, lines 35-36). Anadromous fish such as salmon, steelhead and sturgeon fit this definition, but so do ducks and geese. However, they need to be treated

differently. Unfortunately, the clear message from the draft is that this plan is all about fish as the species of concern, and ecosystem restoration, for the purposes of this Delta Plan, means aquatic ecosystem restoration exclusively. We don't agree that the Delta will be restored if viable populations of certain fish result, while the needs of wetland species such as waterfowl are ignored, or worse, are traded off.

To its credit, the Draft Plan describes one of the Performance Measures as "Restore habitat necessary to avoid a net loss of migratory bird habitat, and where feasible, increase migratory bird habitat to promote viable populations of migratory birds." (Page 70, lines 16 and 17). This statement is a direct quote from the Statute. The purpose of that requirement in the law, which DU and our CVJV colleagues persuaded the Legislature to include, was to establish a "safety net" so that, when all of the trade-offs, management decisions and habitat restoration projects were completed, the work of the CVJV partnership and the private landowners of the past 20-60 years were not negatively impacted. The Draft Plan does not adequately address this issue.

Historically, the Delta provided habitat for both wintering migratory birds and juvenile migratory fish. While it is implausible to design a plan to return these populations to their prior levels, as noted in the Draft Plan, we believe that Delta ecosystem restoration means restoration of ecosystem functions and values for both shallow wetland and aquatic species. The CVJV has painstakingly developed a plan to restore the Delta to ultimately support, through the production of food energy, populations of migratory birds at the 1970's benchmark. We recommend that the Delta Plan adopt a congruent approach. This might also serve as a paradigm for how to treat fish and other species of concern as well: identify the key habitat components needed to support a given historical population, such as the 1970s, as the benchmark, and design the habitat restoration work need to achieve it.

Thank you for considering our comments.

Sincerely,

Mark Biddlecomb
Director